

The History of Beekeeping in Australia

Australia did not have any honeybees before the arrival of the first fleet, with the bees eventually being introduced by the new settlers.

There are many species of native bees in the continent but they are of a solitary nature, only storing a little honey in a nest for reproduction purposes.

In the beginning, the beekeeping industry consisted of a few men each with a small number of hives. At first the hives were worked in one location but owing to trees having different flowering cycles, it was found desirable to move the hives to areas where the trees were flowering.

A horse drawn cart carrying six or eight hives was first used. In later times, a horse drawn lorry drawn by two horses carrying thirty to forty hives was a great step forward. It was necessary to ventilate the hives with a mesh screen and confine the bees with a tight lid, for if they were to escape and sting the horses, the animals would become unmanageable.

With the advent of the automobile, there was a rapid expansion of the industry. Now trucks move a hundred or more hives

at a time to most areas of the state from Coolgardie to Manjimup and all points in between.

Perhaps the most important location for hives is the coastal strip from Yanchep to Lancelin and further north. This area has many species of flowering shrubs and with a milder climate; the bees can survive over the winter in readiness to commence work in the spring.

The Hive

A hive of bees is composed of one or more boxes, a lid and a bottom board with removable frames. Into these frames, the bees build a wax comb consisting of hundreds of tiny cells, which are used to store honey in and to provide a receptacle into which the queen can lay her eggs.

In a strong working hive, there are up to 50,000 bees. These are mainly worker bees which are sterile females, a few drones, which are male bees, whose only purpose in life is to fertilise the queen.

As the worker bees have only a relatively short life span of four to five weeks, compare to the queen who can survive for up to two years; the queen is constantly laying eggs and young bees are hatching every sixteen days, so the population of the hive is maintained.

The Extraction Process

It begins when the apiarist selects a site to position his hives, one where there is a variety of flowering trees and shrubs to provide a source of nectar for the bees to gather. If there is an abundance of nectar, the bees will fill a hive with honey in two to three weeks.

The apiarist will use smoke to control the bees' tendency to sting, then brush off the combs and replace the filled box with an empty box of combs. The filled boxes are then taken to the extracting plant, which is either a mobile trailer or a central honey house.

After removing the wax coating with a steam, heated knife, the combs are placed into an extractor and spun at high speed to throw the honey from the cells. The honey passes through a strainer, to remove any small pieces of wax, and into two hundred litre drums. The honey is now ready either for sale on supermarket shelves or to be exported overseas.

BEEKEEPING IN AUSTRALIA

Originally arranged by Sam Cook, the display in Connor's Mill depicts the history of beekeeping and items of beekeeping equipment from about 1900 onwards.

Kind donations of equipment and other items were received from:

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